Keynote address by the Head of Delegation of the European Union to Lesotho,
H.E. Ambassador Hans DUYNHOUWER,
at the opening of the 23rd Annual General Meeting of the Lesotho Council of Non-Governmental Organisations and the 13th NGO WEEK

Maseru

- 10 December 2012 -

[Protocol]

Greetings to you all - Lumelang bo'm'e le bontate -

I am delighted to be here with you today. I am particularly honoured to have been invited to deliver the keynote address at the opening of the Lesotho Council of NGOs week long deliberations.

Engagement with civil society is a priority for the European Union. We have a long tradition of working with and through civil society. This is also an important feature of the Cotonou Agreement on which co-operation between the EU and Lesotho is based.

The formation of a coalition government with strong democratic credentials creates new opportunities for civil society in Lesotho. The new government’s
effective engagement with civil society will reinforce these democratic credentials even more.

The European Union’s engagement with its partner countries is based on principles of democracy, good governance and human rights. For this reason I am very proud that the European Union has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize this year. The Nobel Prize will be received in Oslo in a few hours by President Herman Van Rompuy representing the European Council, President Martin Schulz from the European Parliament and President José Manuel Barroso from the European Commission. The award is a timely reminder of what our Union stands for and the fundamental principle on which it was built.

In the last six decades the European Union has transformed a war torn continent into a union of 27 democracies. The EU has offered membership to country after country, bolstering their democracies and making them part of world’s largest common market. The EU continues to draw in more countries; Croatia will join next year and there are five more candidate member countries negotiating their future accession.

For all these achievements we must not be complacent. With their prestigious recognition the Nobel Committee also sent a clear message to the EU: we must protect the Union from disintegration and resurgent nationalism. At a time when some tend to portray the EU as a "has been", the Nobel Peace Prize is a recognition that resonates with all generations. The many congratulations we received from leaders and individual citizens around the globe are also a reminder that – despite the recent gloom surrounding the EU - the commitment to peace never goes out of fashion. As a representative of the European Union, I am also pleased and proud to be part of a new chapter in the EU’s external relations through a unique creation, the European Union External Action Service.
From Afghanistan to Somalia and from Egypt to Lesotho, the EU will continue to champion human rights around the globe. To do so, it deploys all its capacities, its expertise in crisis prevention and resolution, the diplomatic skills of its staff on the ground, and development aid to assist those in need. In the wake of the Arab Spring, we have refashioned our approach to promote democracy and prosperity together with our closest neighbours. We are also making significant diplomatic efforts in leading negotiations with Iran and, as part of the Quartet, to secure peace in the Middle East.

To maintain peace and guarantee fundamental freedoms, we need strong governance institutions. Governance institutions that are accountable to their people. A key role of civil society organisations is to contribute to safeguarding the core values of good governance, democracy and the rule of law.

How do we as a European Union view the role of civil society? Here I can refer to a recent green paper of the European Commission. This green paper recognises the role of civil society organisations in their own right and elaborates on its different roles. “Civil society organisations stand out thanks to their capacity to reach out, empower, represent and defend vulnerable and socially excluded groups, and trigger social innovation”. In a changing landscape the role of civil society organisations has evolved beyond service delivery. Civil society has increasingly become a partner in dialogue. Yet, the green paper also underlines that civil society has often a delicate relationship with governments. Civil society organisations focused on human rights and advocacy, including women’s organisations, face often limitations in their opportunities to work. But also, and this must not be overlooked: “Civil society organisations may face challenges of representativeness, transparency,
internal governance and capacity, dependency on international donors as well as competition over resources.” In other words, civil society organisations can only be credible if they practice what they preach: high standards of transparency and accountability, internal democracy, openness, etc.

The last decade we have seen a change in the way civil society organisations operate. They have evolved from charity organisations into development actors. This is a very welcome development. Yet, at the same time it has often made the relationship between civil society organisations and Governments more delicate. In many countries we still see a far too limited space for civil society organisations.

In Lesotho, the EU’s co-operation with civil society organisations is expanding. We started last year with a series of meetings with civil society. In June we had a consultation with civil society organisations to prepare EU programming for the period 2014 to 2020 under the EDF 11. In September we held consultations with civil society organisations on the preparation of the guidelines for the call for proposals under the Deepening Decentralisation and Non State Actors Programme.

In 2013, we hope to further develop our engagement with civil society organisations. In January/February we intend to organise a specific training session with the potential beneficiaries of our financial support. We will also touch upon monitoring and accountability; we expect that organisations benefiting from our support respect the highest standards.

In May next year, we will as usual celebrate on the 9th of May the birth of the European Union. Last year our theme was renewable energy; this year Europe Week will be commemorated under the banner of "Engaging with civil
society”. We envisage a panel discussion with civil society organisations representatives on the theme of ‘the role of the civil society in sustainable development and democracy’. We will also invite civil society organisations to participate in a planned exposition at the Pioneer Mall. This presents an opportunity for civil society organisations to expose their activities to the public at large. With these activities we hope to underscore the critical role civil society organisations play in the country’s development.

Let me also touch upon issues related to the broader governance agenda. At the recent Lesotho – European Union Political Dialogue, a structured dialogue on governance was raised. We hope to associate with this a wide range of stakeholders. There are numerous subjects of interest. I mention the establishment of a human rights commission, the role of customary law, the governance of the country’s growing mineral resources, gender issues etc.

But we will also continue to provide financial support to local civil society organisations. I give two examples.

First example. For civil society organisations to engage it must have the necessary capacity. It is with this in mind that we will shortly sign a contract with the Lesotho Council of NGOs. The project will support the Lesotho Council of NGOs to participate effectively in the different domains of public interests as partners in dialogue and in oversight. This dialogue is of great interest to us. Much of the EU’s support to Lesotho has in recent years taken the form of budget support. Policy dialogue is a key element in this respect, but this dialogue must involve all stakeholders, including an empowered civil society.
Second example. Supporting civil society organisations as service providers is another focus of EU support. Here I mention the EU financed Deepening Decentralisation and Non State Actors Programme. The programme implemented by UNDP and financially also supported by German bilateral co-operation was launched in October of this year. The long term objective of the project is to promote accountable, effective and sustainable service delivery to all Basotho. Here civil society organisations play an important role. With this in mind, we will make available an amount of 30 million Maloti to support concrete initiatives of civil society organisations. Concrete initiatives that improve service delivery, improve governance, strengthen local democracy. We hope that with this initiative service delivery will also reach socially excluded communities. Here we count on the strong capacity of civil society organisations to identify unfulfilled needs. This is essential in a country such as Lesotho with its difficult to reach mountainous areas.

The European Union is therefore committed to increase its engagement with civil society here in Lesotho. Support to initiatives that promote inclusive and sustainable growth. Support to initiatives that promote corporate social responsibility, ethical and sustainable business models, the decent work agenda, public private partnerships, fair trade, equitable access to natural resources and land. The agenda is large, the challenge huge. It is for these reasons that the capacity of civil society organisations must be critically examined. I therefore call on all civil society organisations in Lesotho to give this aspect special attention with the support of the LCN.

I have outlined the areas where the civil society and the European Union can engage over the coming years. As I have already mentioned, the formation of a new government with strong democratic credentials presents a unique opportunity. A unique opportunity to lay the foundation for inclusive
sustainable growth. Inclusive growth that reaches out to all: those in urban areas and those in rural areas, the young and the old, men and women, etc. This will not be possible without your engagement; the engagement of civil society.

I look forward to working together with you in a spirit of partnership.

Thank you for your kind attention.

KHOTSO, PULA, NALA